

PICTURES OF LIFE

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A SERMON
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“What is your life?”
James 4:14

[This Sermon was delivered by Mr. Spurgeon on the evening before he came of age, having been born on June 19, 1834. A much later sermon on the same verse is #1773, What is Your Life?

It was suggested by the sudden death of the Duke of Albany in 1884.

A still later sermon by Mr. Spurgeon, upon verses 13-17, #2242, God’s Will About The Future, was delivered in connection with the “home-going” of Mr. William Olney, and was published in the very week that the Beloved preacher was “called home” in January, 1892]

IT well behooves me, now that another year of my existence has almost gone, standing on the threshold of a fresh era, to consider what I am, where I am going, what I am doing, whom I am serving, and what shall be my reward. I will not, however, do so publicly before you—I hope that I may be enabled to perform that duty in secret.

But rather let me turn this occurrence to another account by speaking to you of the frailty of human life, the fleeting nature of time, how swiftly it passes away, how soon we all shall fade as a leaf, and how speedily the place which knows us now shall know us no more forever. The apostle James asks, “What is your life?” and thanks to inspiration, we are at no great difficulty to give the reply, for Scripture being the best interpreter of Scripture, supplies us with many very excellent answers. I shall attempt to give you some of them.

I. First, we shall view life with regard to ITS SWIFTNESS.

It is a great fact that though life to the young man, when viewed in the prospect appears to be long, to the old man it is ever short and to all men life is really but a brief period. Human life is not long. Compare it with the existence of some animals and trees, and how short is human life! Compare it with the ages of the universe and it becomes a span—and especially measure it by eternity—and how little does life appear! It sinks like one small drop into the ocean and becomes as insignificant as one tiny grain of sand upon the seashore.

Life is swift. If you would picture life, you must turn to the Bible, and this evening we will walk through the Bible-gallery of old paintings.

You will find its swiftness spoken of in the Book of Job, where we are furnished with three illustrations. In the ninth chapter and at the twenty-fifth verse, we read, “Now my days are *swifter than a post*.” We are, most of us, acquainted with the swiftness of post-conveyance. I have sometimes, on an emergency, taken post horses where there has been no railway, and have been amazed and pleased with the rapidity of my journey.

But since, in this ancient Book, there can be no allusion to modern posts, we must turn to the manners and customs of the East, and in so doing we find that the ancient monarchs astonished their subjects by the amazing rapidity with which they received intelligence. By well-ordered arrangements, swift horses, and constant relays, they were able to attain a speed which, although trifling in these days, was in those slower ages a marvel of marvels, so that, to an Eastern, one of the clearest ideas of swiftness was that of “a post.”

Well does Job say that our life is swifter than a post. We ride one year until it is worn out, but there comes another just as swift, and we are borne by it, and soon it is gone, and another year serves us for a steed. Post-house after post-house we pass, as birthdays successively arrive. We loiter not, but vaulting at a leap from one year to another, still we hurry onward, onward, ever onward. My life is like a post—not like the slow wagon that drags along the road with tiresome wheels, but like a post, it attains the greatest speed.

Job further says, “My days are passed away *as the swift ships.*” He increases, you see, the intensity of the metaphor, for if, in the Eastern’s idea, anything could exceed the swiftness of the post, it was the swift ship. Some translate this passage as “the ships of desire,” that is, the ships hurrying home, anxious for the haven, and therefore crowding on all sail.

You may well conceive how swiftly the mariner flies from a threatening storm, or seeks the port where he will find his home. You have sometimes seen how the ship cuts through the billows, leaving a white furrow behind her, and causing the sea to boil around her. Such is life, says Job, “as the swift ships,” when the sails are filled by the wind, and the vessel dashes on, cleaving a passage through the crowding waves. Swift are the ships, but swifter by far is life.

The wind of time bears me along. I cannot stop its motion. I may direct it with the rudder of God’s Holy Spirit. I may, it is true, take in some small sails of sin, which might hurry my days on faster than otherwise they would go, but nevertheless, like a swift ship my life must speed on its way until it reaches its haven.

Where is that haven to be? Shall it be found in the land of bitterness and barrenness, that dreary region of the lost? Or shall it be that sweet haven of eternal peace, where not a troubling wave can ruffle the resting glory of my spirit? Wherever the haven is to be, that truth is the same—we are “as the swift ships.”

Job also says that life is “*as the eagle that hasteth to the prey.*” The eagle is a bird noted for its swiftness. I remember reading an account of an eagle attacking a fish hawk, which had obtained some booty from the deep and was bearing it aloft. The hawk dropped the fish, which fell towards the water, but before the fish had reached the ocean, the eagle had flown more swiftly than the fish could fall and catching it in its beak, it flew away with it.

The swiftness of the eagle is almost incalculable—you see it and it is gone. You see a dark speck in the sky yonder—it is an eagle soaring. Let the fowler imagine that, by and by, he shall overtake it on some mountain’s craggy peak—it shall be long gone before he reaches it. Such is our life. It is like an eagle hastening to its prey—not merely an eagle flying in its ordinary course, but an eagle hastening to its prey. Life appears to be hastening to its end. Death seeks the body as its prey—life is ever fleeing from insatiate death, but death is too swift to be outrun and as an eagle overtakes his prey, so shall death.

If we require a further illustration of the swiftness of life, we must turn to two other passages in the Book of Job, upon which I shall not dwell. One will be found in the seventh chapter, at the sixth verse, where Job says, “*My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle,*” which the weaver throws so quickly that the eye can hardly discern it.

But he gives us a yet more excellent metaphor in the seventh verse of the same chapter, where he says, “O remember that *my life is wind.*” Now this excels in velocity all the other figures we have examined. Who can outrun the winds? Proverbially, the winds are rapid—even in their gentlest motion they appear to be swift.

But when they rush in the tornado, or when they dash madly on in the hurricane, when the tempest blows and tears down everything—how swift then is the wind! Perhaps some of us may have a gentle gale of wind and we may not seem to move so swiftly. But with others, who are only just born, and then snatched away to heaven, the swiftness may be compared to that of the hurricane, which soon snaps the ties of life and leaves the infant dead. Surely our life is like the wind.

Oh, if you could but catch these idea, my friends! Though we may be sitting still in this chapel, yet you know that we are all really in motion. This world is turning round on its axis once in four-and-

twenty hours, and besides that, it is moving around the sun in the three hundred sixty-five days of the year. So that we are all moving—we are all flitting along through space—and as we are travelling through space, so are we moving through time at an incalculable rate. Oh, what an idea this is could we but grasp it!

We are all being carried along as if by a giant angel, with broad outstretched wings, which he flaps to the blast, and flying before the lightning, makes us ride on the winds. The whole multitude of us are hurrying along—where, remains to be decided by the test of our faith and the grace of God—but certain it is that we are all travelling.

Do not think that you are stable, fixed in one position. Fancy not that you are standing still—you are not. Your pulses each moment beat the funeral marches to the tomb. You are chained to the chariot of rolling time—there is no bridling the steeds, or leaping from the chariot—you must be constantly in motion.

Thus, then, have I spoken of the swiftness of life.

II. But next, I must speak concerning THE UNCERTAINTY OF LIFE, of which we have abundant illustrations.

Let us refer to that part of Scripture from which I have chosen my text, the epistle of James, the fourth chapter, at the fourteenth verse—"For what is your life? It is even *a vapour*, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." If I were to ask for a child's explanation of this, I know what he would say. He would say, "Yes, it is even a vapor, like a bubble that is blown upward."

Children sometimes blow bubbles and amuse themselves. Life is even as that bubble. You see it rising into the air—the child delights in seeing it fly about, but it is all gone in one moment. "It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." But if you ask the poet to explain this, he would tell you that, in the morning, sometimes at early dawn, the rivers send up a steamy offering to the sun. There is a vapor, a mist, an exhalation rising from the rivers and brooks, but in a very little while after the sun has risen all that mist has gone.

Hence we read of "the morning cloud, and the early dew that passeth away." A more common observer, speaking of a vapor, would think of those thin clouds you sometimes see floating in the air, which are so light that they are soon carried away. Indeed, a poet uses them as the picture of feebleness,

*"Their hosts are scatter'd like thin clouds
Before a Biscay gale."*

The wind moves them and they are gone. "What is your life? It is even a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." So uncertain is life!

Again, if you read in the Book of Ecclesiastes, at the sixth chapter, and the twelfth verse, you will there find life compared to something else, even more fragile than a vapor. The wise man there says that it is even "*as a shadow*." Now, what can there be less substantial than a shadow? What substance is there in a shadow? Who can lay hold of it?

You may see a person's shadow as he passes you, but the moment the person passes away his shadow is gone. Yea, and who can grasp his life? Many men reckon upon a long existence and think they are going to live here forever—but who can calculate upon a shadow? Go, you foolish man, who says to your soul, "You have much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Go you and store your room with shadows. Go you and pile up shadows and say, "These are mine and they shall never depart." But you say, "I cannot catch a shadow." No, and you cannot reckon on a year, or even a moment, for it is as a shadow that soon melts away and is gone.

King Hezekiah also furnishes us with a simile, where he says that life is *as a thread which is cut off*. You will find this in the prophecy of Isaiah, the thirty-eighth chapter, at the twelfth verse—"Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver." The weaver cuts off his thread very easily—and so is life soon ended.

I might continue my illustrations at pleasure concerning the uncertainty of life. We might find, perhaps, a score more figures in Scripture if we would search. Take, for instance, the grass, the flowers of the field, etc.

But though life is swift and though it is to pass away so speedily, we are still generally very anxious to know what it is to be while we have it. For we say if we are to lose it soon, still, while we live, let us live—and whilst we are to be here, be it ever so short a time, let us know what we are to expect in it.

III. And that leads us, in the third place, to look at LIFE IN ITS CHANGES.

If you want pictures of the changes of life, turn to this wonderful Book of poetry, the Sacred Scriptures, and there you will find metaphors piled on metaphors. And first, you will find life compared to *a pilgrimage* by good old Jacob, in the forty-seventy chapter of Genesis, and the ninth verse. That hoary-headed patriarch, when he was asked by Pharaoh what was his age, replied, "The days of the years of *my pilgrimage* are an hundred and thirty years; few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage." He calls life a pilgrimage.

A pilgrim sets out in the morning and he has to journey many a day before he gets to the shrine which he seeks. What varied scenes the traveler will behold on his way! Sometimes he will be on the mountains, but soon he will descend into the valleys. Here he will be where the brooks shine like silver, where the birds warble, where the air is balmy, and the trees are green, and luscious fruits hang down to gratify his taste.

Soon he will find himself in the arid desert, where no life is found, and no sound is heard, except the screech of the wild eagle in the air, where he finds no rest for the soles of his feet—the burning sky above him and the hot sand beneath him—no roof-tree and no house to rest himself. At another time he finds himself in a sweet oasis, resting himself by the wells of water and plucking fruit from palm trees.

At one time he walks between the rocks in some narrow gorge, where all is darkness. At another time he ascends the hill Mizar. Now he descends into the valley of Baca. Soon he climbs the hill of Bashan, and a high hill is the hill Bashan—and yet again going into the mountains of leopards, he suffers trial and affliction.

Such is life, ever changing. Who can tell what may come next? Today it is fair, tomorrow there may be the thundering storm. Today I may lack for nothing, tomorrow I may be like Jacob, with nothing but a stone for my pillow and the heavens for my curtains. But what a happy thought it is, though we know not how the road winds, we know where it ends. It is the straightest way to heaven to go round about.

Israel's forty years wanderings were, after all, the nearest path to Canaan. We may have to go through trial and affliction. The pilgrimage may be a tiresome one, but it is safe. We cannot trace the river upon which we are sailing, but we know it ends in floods of bliss at last. We cannot track the roads, but we know that they all meet in the great metropolis of heaven, in the center of God's universe. God help us to pursue the true pilgrimage of a pious life!

We have another picture of life in its changes given to us in the ninetieth Psalm, at the ninth verse—"We spend our years *as a tale that is told*." Now David understood about tales that were told. I daresay he had been annoyed by them sometimes and amused by them at other times. There are, in the East, professed storytellers, who amuse their hearers by inventing tales such as those in that foolish book, *The Arabian Nights*.

When I was foolish enough to read that book, I remember sometimes you were with fairies, sometimes with genii, sometimes in palaces, and soon you went down into caverns. All sorts of singular things are conglomerated into what they call a tale. Now, says David, "we spend our years as a tale that is told."

You know there is nothing so amazing as the history of the odds and ends of human life. Sometimes it is a merry rhyme, sometimes a prosy subject—sometimes you ascend to the sublime, soon you descend to the ridiculous. No man can write the whole of his own biography. I suppose, if the complete history of a man's thoughts and words could be written, the world itself would hardly contain the record,

so amazing is the tale that might be told. Our lives are all singular and must to ourselves seem strange—of which much might be said—our life is “as a tale that is told.”

Another idea we get from the thirty-eighth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, at the twelfth verse—“I am removed *as a shepherd's tent*.” The shepherds in the East build temporary huts near the sheep, which are soon removed when the flock moves on. When the hot season comes on, they pitch their tents in the most favorable place they can find and each season has its suitable position.

My life is like a shepherd's tent. I have already pitched my tent in a variety of places, but where I shall pitch it by and by, I do not know. I cannot tell. Present probabilities seem to say that—

*“Here I shall make my settled rest,
And neither go nor come:
No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home.”*

But I cannot tell and you cannot divine. I know that my tent cannot be removed till God says, “Go forward.” And it cannot stand firm unless He makes it so.

*“All my ways shall ever be
Order'd by His wise decree.”*

You have been opening a new shop lately, and you are thinking of settling down in trade and managing a thriving concern. Now paint not the future too brightly, do not be too sure as to what is in store for you. Another has for a long time been engaged in an old establishment—your father always carried on trade there, and you have no thought of moving. But here you have no abiding city—your life is like a shepherd's tent. You may be here, there, and almost everywhere before you die.

It was once said by Solon, “No man ought to be called a happy man till he dies”—because he does not know what his life is to be. But Christians may always call themselves happy men here, because wherever their tent is carried, they cannot pitch it where the cloud does not move, and where they are not surrounded by a circle of fire. God will be a wall of fire round about them and their glory in the midst. They cannot dwell where God is not the bulwark of their salvation.

If any of you who are God's people are going to change your condition, are going to move out of one situation into another, to take a new business, or remove to another county, you need not fear—God was with you in the last place and He will be with you in this. He has said, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God.”

That is an oft-told story of Caesar in a storm. The sailors were all afraid, but he exclaimed, “Fear not! thou carriest Caesar and all his fortunes.” So is it with the poor Christian. There is a storm coming on, but fear not—you are carrying Jesus—and you must sink or swim with Him. Well may any true believer say, “Lord, if You are with me, it matters not where my tent is. All must be well, though my life is removed like a shepherd's tent.”

Again, our life is compared in the Psalms to *a dream*. Now, if a tale is singular, surely a dream is still more so. If a tale is changing and shifting, what is a dream? As for dreams, those flutterings of the benighted fancy, those revelries of the imagination—who can tell what they consist of? We dream of everything in the world and a few things more! If we were asked to tell our dreams, it would be impossible for us to do so.

You dream that you are at a feast and lo! the viands change into Pegasus, and you are riding through the air. Or again, suddenly transformed into a morsel for a monster's meal. Such is life. The changes occur as suddenly as they happen in a dream. Men have been rich one day and they have been beggars the next. We have witnessed the exile of monarchs and the flight of a potentate.

Or in another direction, we have seen a man, neither reputable in company nor honorable in station, at a single stride exalted to a throne. And you, who would have shunned him in the streets before, were

foolish enough to throng your thoroughfares to stare at him. Ah! such is life. Leaves of the Sibyl were not more easily moved by the winds, nor are dreams more variable.

“Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.” How foolish are those men who wish to pry into futurity! The telescope is ready and they are going to look through it, but they are so anxious to see, that they breathe on the glass with their hot breath—and they dim it, so that they can discern nothing but clouds and darkness.

Oh, you who are always conjuring up black fiends from the deep unknown, and foolishly vexing your minds with fancies, turn your fancies out of doors, and begin to rest on never-failing promises! Promises are better than forebodings. “Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.”

Thus I have spoken of the changes of this mortal life.

IV. And now, to close, let me ask, WHAT IS TO BE THE END OF THIS LIFE?

We read in the second Book of Samuel, chapter fourteen, and verse fourteen—“We must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again.” Man is like a great icicle, which the sun of time is continually thawing, and which is soon to be as water spilt upon the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. Who can recall the departed spirit, or inflate the lungs with a new breath of life? Who can put vitality into the heart and restore the soul from Hades? None. It cannot be gathered up again—the place that once knew it shall know it no more forever.

But here a sweet thought charms us. This water cannot be lost, but it shall descend into the soil to filter through the Rock of Ages—at last to spring up a pure fountain in heaven, cleansed, purified, and made clear as crystal. How terrible if, on the other hand it should percolate through the black earth of sin and hang in horrid drops in the dark caverns of destruction!

Such is life! Then make the best use of it, my friends, because it is fleeting. Look for another life, because this life is not a very desirable one—it is too changeable. Trust your life in God’s hand, because you cannot control its movements. Rest in His arms and rely on His might, for He is able to do for you exceeding abundantly above all that you ask or think—and unto His name be glory forever and ever! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

PSALM 39

Verse 1. *I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.*

This is what David said—what he had deliberately resolved upon and solemnly determined in his own mind. “I said, I will take heed to my ways.” That is a good thing for all of us to resolve and to say—“I will take heed.” To be heedless is to be graceless. No man ever does a good thing by accident. We shall none of us get to heaven by blundering.

“I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue.” The tongue may be a most powerful instrument of evil. Tongue sins are terrible sins. They are like sparks of fire which may set a whole town upon a blaze. He that can take heed to his tongue will probably be able to manage all the rest of the members of his body. The tongue is the most untamable member of our frame, and if we sin not with our tongue, we shall most likely be kept from sinning in other ways.

“I will keep my mouth with a bridle,” says David. It should be rendered, “with a muzzle.” He did not mean that he would merely control his tongue, but that he would silence it altogether. “I will keep my mouth with a muzzle, while the wicked is before me.” I do not know whether that was a right resolution on David’s part. Tongues were meant to be used and there are often opportunities of using them to God’s glory even in the presence of the wicked.

Sometimes, we are bound to use our tongue in rebuking their sin, yet we cannot criticize David's resolution very much, because when the wicked are before us, it may be only like casting pearls before swine if we begin to speak to them even upon the best themes, and we may be drawn away, by their company, to speak that which is questionable. So that, often, it may be best to keep our mouth muzzled while the wicked are before us.

2. *I was dumb with silence,*

"I was as silent as if I had been dumb. I did not say a word." It seems to me that this silence of the psalmist was partly sullen and partly judicious. "I was dumb with silence,"

2. *I held my peace, even from good;*

He was a total abstainer from all speech. Perhaps he felt that he could not speak a little without speaking too much and so he refrained from speech altogether. Yet we must not follow his example to closely in this matter, for there is a time for speech as well as a time for silence. It was not good for David to hold his peace even from good. It is good for us to hold our peace rather than speak unwisely, but it would be better for us to speak wisely, discreetly—as God's Spirit should direct us.

2. *And my sorrow was stirred.*

It is a great relief to sorrow to be able to speak about it. Be not silent in your grief, lest your grief should burn too fiercely within your heart. It is often one of the signs of a failing mind when persons sit quite still and will not tell their grief to anyone. Tell your grief to your God, first of all, and you may also tell it with advantage to some sympathizing friend. But David felt that he could not speak, so his sorrow was stirred, troubled, agitated, like a pent-up fire that must sooner or later burst into a blaze.

3. *My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned:*

While he was musing, his heart was fusing and there was much that was most confusing to him. He saw the prosperity of the wicked and the oppression of the righteous. He heard the reproaches of the ungodly and he felt the stings of affliction and trial in his own soul. So, as he did not speak, his heart grew hot within him. "While I was musing the fire burned: [See sermon #576, Quiet Musing]

3. *Then spake I with my tongue,*

We say, "Murder will out," and so will misery. David's heart had become like a volcano and the fire burned so furiously within that he was obliged to let the burning lava flow forth and so give his soul vent. There is no speech like that which comes from a hot heart. That shot from the tongue which has been made red-hot in the heart is sure to tell upon the adversary. "Then spake I with my tongue." And what he said was not unwise. There was nothing of boasting or excitement in it—it was a very wise, plain, earnest prayer.

4. *LORD,*

That was a good beginning of David's speech. When we turn our burning words towards God, and not towards men, good will come of them. David's hot heart finds a vent Godward. This was the wisest thing that he could do, cry unto his God. "LORD,"

4. *Make me to know mine end,*

Did David mean to pray, "Let me die," like Elijah did? I am half afraid that he did. And many a time some of God's servants, in their great heats, when their soul has been fuller of passion than of faith, have prayed in this sense, "Make me to know mine end." Yet a better meaning may be put upon the psalmist's words and we are bound to put the best meaning upon them that we can.

He may have meant, "Let me know, Lord, that my sorrows will come to an end, that they are not to last forever." Death may be looked at through the glass of faith till it becomes even a goodly and desirable object. "Lord, make me to know mine end,"

4. *And the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.*

Our days are all measured. They do not come to an end by accident As merchants measure their yards of silk or cotton goods, so does God measure out life to us. There is not half an inch more or less than God Himself determines that we shall have. If David wanted to know what the measure of his days was, he was trying to pry into the folded leaves of the future. Such prying is both wrong and futile—and

we may be thankful that we do not know what the measure of our days is in this sense. We do know that, at their utmost, they are not likely to exceed the threescore years and ten, or the fourscore years, which now make up the ordinary measure of human life.

5. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth;

That is a very short measure—the breadth of a hand the space that we can span with one of our hands—yet that is the true measure of our life. “Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth;”

5. And mine age is as nothing before thee:

What are seventy or eighty years, even if we live as long as that, out of the thousands of years that men have lived on the face of the earth? One man’s life seems but a drop in the great ocean of human history. Yet what an insignificant thing human history itself is!

Some thousands of years ago, there were no men upon this earth, yet what is the history of the whole world compared with eternity? It is not worth speaking of. It is scarcely one tick of the clock of eternity. Why, this world is only like a newly-blown bubble and the sun is but a spark fresh from the eternal fire. As compared with the eternal God, man is a nonentity, a nullity, and David was right when he said to the Lord—“Mine age is as nothing before thee.”

5. Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

When he is strongest, calmest, happiest, when he is in his prime, when he is at his best, his best, of which he is so vain, is itself vain. Whatever there may be true about man, this is true, that he is unstable and soon passes away. He is constant in nothing but his inconstancy. “Verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity.”

6. Surely every man walketh in a vain show: [See sermon #2346, Earth’s Vanities and heaven’s Verities]

This world is a mere theater and men strut across its stage, acting their various parts. They come and they go as if they were mere figures moved by invisible wires. The most of men do not live at all, but only seem to live, for they have not the true, spiritual, eternal life within them. Every man walks like a performer in a pageant, or like those who march in a procession. We think we are standing still and watching others pass by, but we are ourselves part of the vain show, and are passing away with the rest.

6. Surely they are disquieted in vain:

They fret, they fume, they vex themselves, but it is all in vain. They make a noise, so the Hebrew says, in vain. Hear the clamor of the streets, hear the buzz of the exchange, hear the noise of war, the shouts of conflict—it is all in vain, it is all for nothing. You are troubled about your business, troubled about your children, troubled about your wealth, troubled about I know not what—surely, you are disquieted in vain. Oh, that we could but believe that all this disquietude is only vanity! Then might we live much more peaceful lives.

6. He heaped up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

He has cut his corn and it stands in sheaves in the field, but his enemy comes and carts it away. Or if he has gathered it into his granary, it is consumed by rats or mice, or it becomes mildewed and useless. How many there are who spend their lives gathering wealth with the muck rake, and then their sons come with the fork and shovel, and scatter it quite as quickly as their fathers gathered it.

What is the good of getting all this gold together—and stinting yourself in order to get it—when the one who has it after you will never thank you for it, or if he did, you would be dead, and buried, and would know nothing of his gratitude?

7. And now, LORD, what wait I for?

The psalmist improves as he advances. Now you see that he is cut loose from the world. He has seen the vanity of man and he has seen the vanity of wealth, so he says, “Now, Lord, what wait I for? What is there here, in this land of shadows, that I should wait for? Why do I sit down where nothing good has ever come, or ever can come?” The ropes that held the balloon to earth are cut and up it mounts.

7. My hope is in thee.

This is a glorious hope. This is a hope that finds its all in God. This hope will outlast death and the grave. This hope will be our treasure in eternity. Can each of you truly say this, “My hope is in thee”?

Let this be the language of your heart as you speak to your God, "This is what I wait for—that I may enjoy Your presence here and that I may rejoice in Your presence hereafter—I wait for the coming of my Lord. I wait for the time when the Lord shall call me home."

8. *Deliver me from all my transgressions:*

That is a better prayer than if David had said, "Deliver me from all my sorrows." Now he has hit the very center of the target. "Deliver me from all my transgressions." So let each one of us pray at this moment, "O Lord, I do not ask to be saved from Your rod, but I do ask to be washed from my sin. Do what You will with me, but do forgive me, do sanctify me, do let me be washed in the precious blood of Jesus. 'Deliver me from all my transgressions.'"

9. *Make me not the reproach of the foolish.*

Do not let the wicked be able to say, "See the sadness of that man's countenance, see how sullen he looks. His face is like a thundercloud—it is clear that a Christian has no joy." Let not the wicked be able to say that, my Lord, but save me from sin, and give me the full joy of Your salvation, and then they will not be able to reproach me.

9. *I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.*

You will understand this verse much better if we read it in another tense, as it should be, "Now I will be dumb, I will not open my mouth; because thou didst it." David was wrong the first time when he was dumb, but he is right this second time. Two things may be very much like one another outwardly, yet very different inwardly. There is a silence which the Christian ought to keep.

10. *Remove thy stroke away from me:*

The child of God who is perfectly resigned to his heavenly Father's will, may yet pray to be delivered from his trouble. Prayer for deliverance from grief is quite consistent with perfect submission to the will of God. We may pray, for Jesus prayed, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But we must take care to also add, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilst."

10. *I am consumed by the blow of thine hand.*

"You have beaten me sorely. Oh, strike me not again!" This is good pleading, for God does not mean to consume His own children. He means to consume our sins—and when He makes us cry, "Deliver me from all my transgressions," and when we submit to His holy will, He will soon put His rod away. As soon as you are willing to bear it, you shall not have to bear it any longer. When you submit yourself to the stroke, then the stroke will cease to be given.

11. *When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah.*

When God whips His children, He does not play with them. God is in earnest, if we are not. And when He corrects us, He means us to feel His rod—and He means us to bear the scars it leaves upon us. There must be real strokes and real smarts, ere we are likely to be cured of sin, and sometimes, when He is dealing in chastisement with His people, He makes their beauty to depart like a piece of cloth or fur when the moth gets into it and utterly destroys it. What a poor thing beauty is if the moth can eat it up!

If a little affliction can take away our beauty, we may well pray for that beauty for which Moses pleaded, "Let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us." That is a beauty of quite another kind—the beauty of grace which no moth can consume. But if we have not that, our beauty is a poor thing. Let no man, let no woman, be vain of beauty which can so soon be gone.

12. *Hear my prayer, O LORD,*

David is dumb, yet he prays. Dumb as to complaints, but eloquent as to pleading with his God.

12. *And give ear unto my cry;*

The psalmist goes from pleading to crying, and believers often thus intensify their prayers. There is something more sorrowful, more earnest, more prevalent, about crying unto God than mere ordinary praying. "Give ear unto my cry."

12. *Hold not thy peace at my tears:*

David goes further still, for the most eloquent things in the world are tears. They are the irresistible weapons of weakness. Many a woman, many a beggar, many a child has gained by tears what could not be obtained in any other way—so David pleaded most powerfully when he prayed, “Hold not thy peace at my tears:”

12. *For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.*

“You do entertain me in Your tent as I have entertained wanderers many a time. I have broken bread with You and eaten of Your salt. Be kind to the stranger and sojourner as You have bidden Your servants to be.” Or does David mean that, as God is a stranger in His own world, so are we while necessarily passing through it?

13. *O spare me,*

That is a singular petition, for just now he seemed to be wanting to get to the end of his days, yet he says, “O spare me,” like Elias, who was afraid to die, and so ran away from Jezebel, and then prayed to God, “Let me die.” So are God’s children still a mass of contradictions—longing for death, and yet, when death comes, they cry, “O spare me! O spare me!”

13. *That I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more.*

“Give me a little respite, that I may take my nourishment and have my sleep before I go hence to be no more, for soon I shall do that. But give me a little interlude first, wherein I may again take my harp and sing to Your praise.” If worldlings cannot understand this mingled experience, God’s children know that this is only one of the many paradoxes with which they are perfectly familiar. In any case, may each one of us be ready when it shall be God’s time for us to “go hence, and be no more” here!

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